



Hundred Flowers Campaign, China, 1956

A Different Kind of Preparation for Work

Some of the literature of the “Activity Theory” camp is about adult education, and about what they call “remediation”. This is the term for what is done to patch up in a classroom, or institutional environment, the gaps which were left in the student’s education during previous institutionalised efforts of the student, with their previous teachers.

This is an apologetic kind of way of approaching the general raising of the population’s cultural level. It takes for granted that the remedy for the failure of one institution or set of institutions is another, rather similar institution, or in other words, more of the same.

Hence we did not include Mike Rose's article, based on US experience, called "[Rethinking Remedial Education and the Academic-Vocational Divide](#)". But Helen Worthen's criticism of Rose's article is more interesting, and more to the point for our purposes than Rose's article itself, so it is today's attached text, with the title "A Different Kind of Preparation for Work".

Starting from Mike Rose's enthusiastic advocacy, Worthen works back to something like Jean Lave's insight, arguing that it is not the skills that are used on the job, but the skill of having and improving the job that are more crucial. And these are general and social skills, and even political skills.

The heart of the matter seems to be contained in these two paragraphs of Worthen's:

'But coming to this project as someone with deep experience in the teachers union (and one that considers itself part of the broader labor movement), I could not help noticing that the majority of vocational classes were taught from the employer's point of view, not from the worker's point of view... Thus the students learned nothing about labor and employment law, workers' compensation, occupational safety and health or – especially – how to read, enforce or negotiate a contract, nothing about labor history or the history of labor struggles in their field, nothing about what union might or might not represent them. They might not even know how to read a paycheck to

see if they were being paid as employees or independent contractors. They would be delivered to their first job interview as naïve about the social relations of their work as if they had just graduated from high school.

‘Labor education takes as its content domain all of these social relations. Mostly sited in land-grant universities around the US, and in some places in community colleges, labor education is the “applied” side of labor studies, which is an academic sister to labor education. Labor education is usually extension education, outreach to working people and the labor movement the way agricultural extension is outreach to farmers and agribusiness. Labor education programs burgeoned during the 1940s – 1960s; in the last forty years, they have become targets of the conservative political agenda. There is no doubt that the literacy artifacts of labor education qualify as requiring advanced academic skills: reading and analyzing legal documents including court cases, labor board decisions, arbitrations; reading and writing contracts, grievances, safety complaints; doing strategic planning; administering an organization including budgeting; running elections; producing newsletters or websites; dealing with the media, just to begin the list. These are not taught as bitted-down (fragmented) skills, however, and the labor education classroom does not in any way resemble the remediation classroom. People with advanced degrees

(social workers, teachers, nurses, grad students) sit next to and learn from custodians, bus drivers, clerical workers, homecare workers or construction workers. Teaching is very student-centered and strongly non-competitive. In the best classes, a community of practice is being created. Yet it would be very hard to argue that this is not “preparation for work.” Nor would you be able to place a class like this on one side or the other of the “academic divide.”

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [A Different Kind of Preparation for Work, Helena Worthen, 2012.](#)
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